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Preschool Children Preferences on Their School Environment

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Abstract

Children and adults have different views and preferences about the environment around them. Digital cameras offer a tangible documentation and representations of children's perception and preferences about their school environment. This study is to identify children's photography selection and preferences on the school environment, both indoor and outdoor. This study was conducted on 19 preschoolers (n=19) of age 4 and 5 using the project based approach. The children were given a digital camera and were asked to take pictures of their school environment that they really like. Their photographs were analyzed to see the overall preferences about their school environment.

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1. Introduction

Understanding young children perspectives about their environment is important and should be taken into consideration in research as well as in practice. By knowing what young children think, adults; especially parents and teachers could understand these young children emotions, needs, interest and preferences much better and probably could offer a more meaningful learning experience to the children by acknowledging and providing materials and experiences that are significant to the children's interest. However, it is a question how far adults do take into consideration children's perspectives, and how

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adults, especially teachers take account young children's perspectives. It is important for adults to really understand what children think and see as children's views about the environment and the world may not be necessarily the same as how adults view the world, and it is a false impression for adults to assume that children have the same reason of what they see around them. In a report by Cook & Hess (2007), Scott (2000) suggested that there is a large gulf between adult observation about a child's understandings of a situation and the child's own perceptions. This is consistent with DeMarie (2003) where the study shows that what the preschool children notices, photographed and said about the field trip is not exactly as how adults expected it. Thus, it is agreeable that adults could not actually see the world from a child's perspective (Cook & Hess, 2007; Greig & Taylor, 1999) and children's perspectives are recognized as separate to and different from those of adults.

Currently there has been a growing interest among researchers in studying about how things are seen from a child's view, and the children's perspectives about the environment (e.g. Cook & Hess, 2007; DeMarie, 2003; DeMarie & Rasmussen & Smidt, 2001, 2002; Einarsdottir, 2005; Ethridge, 2006). This shows that children opinions and views are gradually being acknowledged and accepted by the adult society, as children are now seen as capable and knowledgeable experts on their own lives, possessing knowledge, perspectives and interest (Langsted, 1994; Dahl, 1995; Einarsdottir, 2005; Mayall, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2001). Since the need to understand young children's perspectives have been emphasized into practice, children are now given the openness and opportunities to make choices and thus teachers should provide a rich experience to each child as a necessary foundation for the child to be able to tell others about their own perspectives (Samuelsson, 2004). One method that has gain popularity among practitioners and researchers is through the use of cameras by young children.

Children's photographs are indeed a salient and visible documentation on their personal views about the environment. This is because the lens of the camera is subject to a focal point where it captures and documents the viewer's specific point of interest. Besides, photography creates an immediate sense of being there, where children responses are centered around feelings (as expressed by the subjects in their photographs) and factual information about places represented in the photographs (Schiller & Tillett, 2004). It has been realized that through photography, children has described themselves not just as artists, but also as thinkers and decision-makers. When children capture pictures of the environment, they are in charge of their own decisions; they are experts of their own interest while providing evidence (Einarsdottir, 2005). Through photography, children capture pictures of what they want, and at the same time making choices on things that are most important to them or things that make an impression on them (Barker & Meller, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001; Cook & Hess, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2005; Rasmussen, 1999; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2001). However, with respect to the child's perspective, it is important to bear in mind that children's expression of meaning is always taking place in a certain situation, a specific context, based on the child's earlier experiences and capacity to express himself or herself (Samuelsson, 2004). Thus, it might also important for adults to offer a focused field of knowledge, despite listening and allowing children to express their views and opinion in order to understand their perspectives of the environment. Hence, this study is to identify children's photography selection on the school environment, both indoor and outdoor and to investigate their preferences of their school environment and objects around them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Children and Photographs

Young children are no longer excluded with the existence to photographs, and young children these days are in fact regularly exposed to many types of photographs, either commercial photographs or

educational photographs. Children were first exposed to pictures and photographs when parents start to read story books to the infant or maybe when showing photographs of the family members for the first time. Pictures and photographs serve as a symbol of representing our world and it often shares the physical resemblance with their referents. It is important for someone to understand that photographs are artifacts that serve as a symbol that represents something other than itself (DeLoache, 1991), which surprisingly easy for children to relate to. However, to understand pictures, one must represent the picture and its referent at the same time to be able to draw an inference from one to the other (DeLoache, 1987; DeLoache, Pierroutsakos & Troseth, 1996; Salsa & DeMendoza, 2007). Usually, when someone looks at a picture, it will focus on the representation not the picture as an object (DeLoache, 1991). For example, if a child sees a line drawing of a whisk, the child will say “This is a whisk”, and extend the name to the real-world whisks, not to other drawings (Priessler & Carey, 2004; Priessler & Bloom, 2007). Even though very young children might not appreciate photographs as much as adults, photographs and pictures are found to be much easier for young children to understand and to relate with the real object (see DeLoache, 1991). This ability is shown in a study by DeLoache (1991), where it is found that young children of 2.5 years old could relate pictures with the real object. In the study, two experiments were conducted, where in experiment 1, children were given 4 color photographs which depicted the 4 hiding places (using one object- the furniture) in the room and in experiment 2, children were introduced with two new picture conditions- a wide angle photographs of a scene (the hiding places in the room, but with many objects) and a line drawing of a scene. On each trial, the experimenter pointed to one of the photographs to indicate the hiding toys. In both experiments, it is found that the 2.5 years old could successfully exploited the information in the picture to retrieve the toy. This shows that young children have the ability to understand that a picture is a representation of the real object and also they could already understand various types of photographs with the real objects.

2.2. Children As Photographers

Many practitioners and researchers are now preferable to use camera as part of the project with young children, as the digital technology can be a powerful and useful tool in assisting young children with projects despite it could be utilized in various ways for various purposes. This is because of the key feature of a project itself, which is indeed research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to questions about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children (Helm & Katz, 2001). Besides, it allow children to engage in discussion on pervious experiences and knowledge related to the topic, gathering and recording new data, taking measurement, and so forth and it encourages children to identify subtopics of special interest to them and to accept responsibility for particular types of tasks that will contribute to the overall investigation (Katz & Chard, 2001). One section of the project approach is the utilization of technology, which could improve the quality of the learning experiences in the classroom and one way to utilize the use of technology is through the use of cameras by children, for them to explore and see the world around them. With the emerging use of technology in the classroom, the use of camera is no longer a huge challenge for many young children, especially to those who live in the urban area, as camera is widely used by many families in various occasions and events. Besides, with the development of modern equipment, it has been easy for beginners to take photographs, and most children who are offered the camera tend to show great enthusiasm at taking pictures. The development of good single use camera, and now digital technology, have recently made photography accessible to children than ever before (Thomas, Davison & Sharples, 2001).

Several researches have shown the use of camera among young children and photographs taken by them, through activities such as field trips, self exploration and direct engagement with the environment. For example, in a study by DeMarie (2003), children were brought to the zoo for a field trip and each

child were given disposable cameras and were asked to take pictures that they think important about their field trip. This is to see children's perspectives about their school field trips and also to see if the time, expense and anxiety that teachers felt when taking long trip were worth it. In another study by DeMarie & Ethridge (2006) preschoolers were given cameras during school session, to show families what happen at the center during the day the children were there through children's photographs. Results shows that when young children were given a camera as part of their project activities, children tend to show more details about the classroom rather than just asking without any photographs. This shows that the camera can be a very useful for children to work on as part of their project, as it could benefit both children and adults in many ways.

3. Methodology

Participants: This study involved a random sample of, 6 four years old and 13 five years old children (n=19), with a total of five males and fourteen female. These children are attending their preschool and kindergarten at Twinkle Tots Day Care Centre, Wangsamaju, Kuala Lumpur. All of these children were at the center 5 days a week from 8.00am to 1.00pm. Most of the participants have engaged with the camera before, based on an informal interview when the camera was first introduced.

Procedure: Children were first engaged in two discussions (during circle time) about cameras and the things that they like the most in the school. After each discussion, they were given cameras for them to get familiarized with the tool. Once the children are comfortable handling the camera, they were asked to take pictures of things that they like the most in the school.

Each child was given approximately 45 to 60 minutes to handle the camera and they were consistently reminded of the question as they handle the camera. During the photography session, each child was interviewed on some of their photographs to ensure they are taking pictures of the things they like in the school. A total of n= 747 pictures were analyzed and pictures are divided into two categories; outdoor and indoor to see children's preferences of their environment.

4. Results and Discussions

As the children were given the liberty to take pictures of anything and anywhere they like in the school, most of the children tend to take snapshots of both indoor and outdoor. Only 2 children (4 years old) took photos only of the outdoor and 1 child of the same age took photos only of the indoor. One of the children, Alia, explained about her preference of taking photos outdoor when asked whether she wanted to take photos of her classroom.

"No. Alia like it outside. I like trees, flowers and more!"

Looking at the overall children's photographs, results show that there are more photos of the outdoor compared to the indoor. A total of 747 (70%) from 1078 photographs were compiled and analyzed. A total of 331 photos were not included in the analysis due to very blur and dark images, due to poor handling of the camera. From the total of 747 photos, a total of 285 (38%) photos were taken indoor, 313 (42%) outdoor photos and 149 (20%) portraits (see Table 1). The portraits were separated from the outdoor and indoor categorization because it does not reflect any preferences towards indoor or outdoor environment. Overall, most photos were taken outdoor compared to indoor and portraits, which shows that children do have preferences of the outdoor, and not just indoor; where they spend most of their time throughout the day.

Table 1. Total Children's Photographs on Indoor, Outdoor and Portraits

4 and 5 years old	Indoor	Outdoor	Portraits	Total
	285 (38%)	313 (42%)	149 (20%)	747 (100%)

Table 2. Total Photographs Taken by 4 and 5 Years Old Children

No. of Photos	4 years old	5 years old	Total
	275 (37%)	472 (63)	747 (100%)

From the overall total of 747 photographs compiled, a total of 275 (37%) photographs was taken by the 4 years old (n=6) and a total of 472 (63%) photographs was taken by the 5 years old (n=13) (see Table 2). The huge difference in the number of photographs between the 4 and 5 years old is because of lack of participation from four other 4 years old, which probably due to lack of interest or they are engaged in other preferable activities when the camera is offered. Table 3 shows that out of the 275 photographs taken by the 4 years old, 27 (10%) of it were taken indoors and 179 (65%) were taken outdoors and 69 (25%) were pictures of people (portraits). From the total of 472 photographs taken by the 5 years old, 258 (55%) were photos of indoors, 134 (28%) outdoors and 80 (17%) photographs of people. Indoor photos that are taken include indoor activity areas, decorations, self-own materials and classroom materials and outdoor photos include outdoor areas, outdoor decorations, nature and outdoor toys.

Table 3 below shows that the 4 years old children tend to take more pictures of the outdoor and people compared to the 5 years old. Only one of the 4 years old children took pictures only in the classroom (indoor) and none outside. This is probably because of the classroom location, which is located at the ground level of the building and the classroom entrance lead straight to the outdoor area, which is easily accessible for the children. Since the classroom provide easy access to the outdoor, children were allowed to move in and out of the classroom during their activity time (such as to pluck leaves during art activities). In the other hand, results show that the 5 years old children tend to take more photos of the indoor compared to the 4 years old. This is also probably due to the location of the classroom, which is located at the first level of the building. Children in this classroom were given more indoor activities as the outdoor environment is not easily accessible and they are allowed to be outside only at a certain time of the day. These 5 years old children usually spent more of their time indoor then outdoor compared to the 4 years old and therefore there is a possibility why their photograph selections focuses more of the indoor environment.

Table 3. Comparisons of 4 and 5 Years Old Children's Photographs on Indoor, Outdoor and Portraits

Age	Indoor	Outdoor	Portraits	Total
4 years old	27 (10%)	179 (65%)	69 (25%)	275 (100%)
5 years old	258 (55%)	134 (28%)	80 (17%)	472 (100%)

Looking at the overall photographs, children of both ages are capable to take wide, close-up and detail snapshots, using the 'zoom control', which actually illustrate a particular activity areas as well as specific

objects such as a particular flower. For example, with a wide snap shot, we can see that the child chooses to take photo of the ball area (Figure 1, a) which is located outside the classroom. With a close-up snapshot (Figure 1,b) the child is focusing on a more specific object, which is the ball that they like to play with and, with a detail snap shot (Figure 3,c), the child tend to focus on a very specific area of the entire ball, which is the spikes. With the ability to produce such photos, it shows that children are able to actually show the specific location and things that they like in the school.



Fig. 1. (a) Ball area; (b) Specific object; (c) Detail snap shot of the ball

Below are some of the pictures taken by the 4 and 5 years old children (Figure 2, 3 & 4):



Fig. 2. Picture taken by the 4 years old children

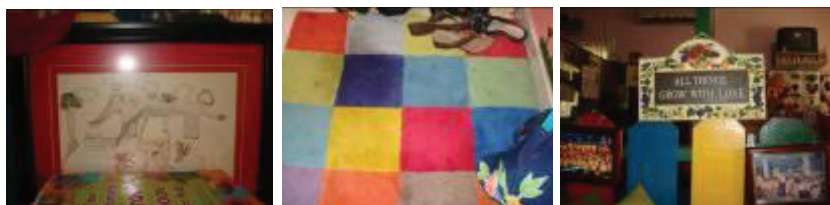


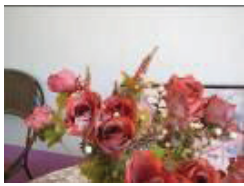



Fig. 3. Picture taken by the 5 years old children



Fig. 4. Picture taken by the 5 years old children (cont')

During the process of the project, each child was interviewed on a randomly picked photo to ensure that they are taking photos of things they like in their school. Each child did mention why they take that picture and some explained what they really like about that picture. Based on these interviews, it clearly shows that children do take photos of the things that they like, and they are more selective in their photographs when they were given a specific question. Below (Table 4) are some of the interviews on their photos.

Table 4. Children perception towards their pictures

Photos				
				
(4 years old male) "Nice flowers!"	(4 years old female) "Uuuuu.....I like big balls. Doing! Doing!"(making bouncing actions)	(5 years old female) "I like this. I feel like cooking."	(5 years old female) "I like pink. I like it. Nice"	

5. Conclusion

Photography can be a valuable experience for each and every child, as it allows children to seek, decide and discover things and environment around them, besides giving them a chance to develop their skills in photography. Each child was obviously excited when given a chance to handle the camera and as they move around the school, these children tend to discuss, share and give opinion about each other pictures. Throughout this study, it is interesting to see that children are actually capable handling the camera and many are capable of manipulating some parts of the camera carefully and successfully, such as the zoom control, shutter release and the display button, which could help produce quality photos and the LCD screen tend to give children a sense of reassurance of the photos taken.

From the above findings, it is found that young children prefer to take more pictures of the outdoor compared to the indoor. However, due to the different location of both classrooms there is a big difference on each age group preferences towards the environment, where the 4 years old are found to take more photos of the outdoor and the 5 years old are found to take more photos of the indoor. This is because the 4 years old classroom is located at the ground level of the building and the 5 years old classroom is located at the first floor of the building, whereby the outdoor environment is easily accessible for the 4 years old compared to the 5 years old. Thus it gives the 4 years old classroom the opportunity to interact more frequently with the outdoor environment. Therefore, it is recommended that

the location of each classroom should be at the same ground level with easy access to the outdoor environment, as it will give children a richer learning experience. Besides, it is also recommended that for classroom that is not easily accessible to the outdoor environment, teachers should consider to give children frequent access to the outdoor.

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